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The Troubled Ecstasy of Yeats's "Purgatory" and "At the Hawk's Well"

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THE TROUBLED ECSTASY

OF YEATS'S "PURGATORY" AND "AT THE HAWK'S WELL"

(TITLE)

BY

GREGORY MICHAEL SADLEK

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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THE TROUBLED ECSTASY OF YEATS'S "PURGATORY" AND "AT THE HAWK'S WELL"

BY

GREGORY MICHAEL SADLEK

B. A., Quincy College, 1973

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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A great amount of W. B. Yeats's writing attests to his fascination with the preternatural. Indeed, it seems that Yeats felt the sacred experience to be somehow central in the living of a full life. Further, in his essay "The Celtic Element in Literature," he proposed that all great literature arises out of the passion which flows from the sacred experience. Yeats thought that drama as well as poetry, then, must plumb this core of life. And in his essay "The Tragic Theatre" he declared that great tragedy deals with feelings and experiences which are universal and timeless and which break down "the dykes that separate man from man." Throwing the audience and actors into the Anima Mundi, his plays were to be vehicles for the sacred experience.

If one grants that Yeats attempted to "touch" the sacred through his plays, he next might wonder whether this "religiosity" can be evaluated or measured in some objective manner. Do the plays, for example, really present a "sacred" experience, and, if so, in what ways are they "sacred"? Mircea Eliade's book, The Sacred and the Profane, in defining three concepts which were attendant to primitive sacred experience: sacred space, sacred time, and myth, offers itself as a possible tool for effectively measuring Yeats's literary religiosity.

The first chapter of this thesis, then, attempts to summarize Eliade's findings on primitive religious experience, especially those regarding sacred space, sacred time, and myth. The next two chapters treat two of Yeats's essays which are relevant to this query: "The Celtic Element in Literature" and

"The Tragic Theatre." These essays give the reader Yeats's views on the primitive religious experience and on the "religious" experience which he tried to construct into his plays.

With these theories in mind, the thesis then turns to two plays representative of Yeats's dramatic art: "At the Hawk's Well" and "Purgatory." It finds that the plays, measured with Eliade's criteria, do contain trappings of the sacred. The well, for instance, in "At the Hawk's Well" seems to have some of the characteristics and functions of primitive sacred poles or other sacred spots. And the characters in "Purgatory" seem to come into contact with a type of sacred time in the recurrent appearances of the spirit of the Old Man's mother. Both plays, too, seem to be written in a mythical style.

When the thesis turns to the content or "message" of Yeats's myths, however, a paradox emerges. While Yeats could hold that all great literature is nourished by the sacred passions, he could not advocate the sacred experience to the common man. According to Yeats, the quest for the sacred was for only the hero. For the common man Yeats advocates humanistic values, those values found in the "foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart," and a mundane style of life. This is why the sacred experience is neither gracious nor salutary for the characters in the plays; they experience a "troubled ecstasy."

It is in this matter that Yeats departs from traditional religious convictions, for, if Eliade is trusted as an authority, the sacred has always been the source of Being, stability, and order for the common man.

Contents

Introduction

W. B. Yeats once asked an old man from county Sligo: "Have you ever seen a fairy or such like?" The man retorted: "Amn't I annoyed with them?"[1] Similarly, one suspects that if a person who had just experienced "At the Hawk's Well" or "Purgatory" were to ask Yeats if he believed in the mystical experience, the great poet would reply: "Haven't you just been immersed in one?" Indeed, it seems that no one who has seen any of Yeats's plays could fail to be impressed with the eerie, "other-worldly" feelings which they evoke. A performance of "At the Hawk's Well," for example, conjures up in the mind of the beholder images of pagan rituals, heroic initiation rites, and vague, unsettling dreams which seemed forgotten long ago. There is evidence in the play of the use of myth and religious symbolism, a strange feeling of being "out-of-time" and in another land. And one leaves the theater convinced that Yeats was being consistent when he wrote Dorothy Wellesley that "the passion of the verse comes from the fact that the speakers are holding down violence or madness--'down Hysteria passio.'"[2]

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[1] W. B. Yeats, Editor's Introduction, Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 1975), p. 3.

[2] W. B. Yeats, Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 94.

From biographical data we know that Yeats was interested in contemporary theosophical doctrines and practices. We also know that he, Lady Gregory, and others garnered old Irish folklore and myths.[3] But one wonders, despite all this interest in the preternatural, how closely do Yeats's plays reproduce the primitive religious experience--or do they at all? Is it possible to measure the "religiosity" of Yeats's work using some outside, "objective" criteria? These questions are tempting ones indeed and are the very questions to which this essay will be addressed.

Two different ways that one could approach an investigation of the sacred in Yeats suggest themselves immediately. First, from Yeats's prose writings on the theater, especially "The Tragic Theatre," it is clear that he was striving to involve the audience and actors in some common preternatural adventure. In that essay Yeats talked about "breaking of the dykes" which separate individuals.[4] He wanted to have the audience themselves thrown into the vast realms of the Anima Mundi. To do this, Yeats adopted a self-consciously mythical style of writing. He also directed that his plays be performed in a very ritualistic manner. But how close did he come to recovering the primitive

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[3]For Yeats's introduction to Madame Blavatsky and his subsequent initiation into the Order of the Golden Dawn see Joseph Hone, W. B. Yeats: 1865-1939 (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1943), pp. 73 - 77. For Yeats's work with Lady Gregory on Irish myth and folklore see Hone, pp. 148 - 150.

[4]W. B. Yeats, Essays (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1924), p. 298.

religious experience? Obviously, the question could be answered only by the members of an audience who have experienced both a Yeatsian tragedy and the primitive religious ecstasy. But this essay will present criteria to measure the theoretical religious impact of Yeats's plays upon the audience.

But there is a further question, one which involves the "myths" which Yeats invented or adapted for his plays: Do the characters and the situations which appear in the plays manifest characteristics consistent with the religious concepts of primitive men? Does the space, for example, "At the Hawk's Well" correspond at all to primitive men's experience of sacred space? Are the characters in "Purgatory" enveloped in sacred time? And, most importantly, what is the impact of the "sacred experience" on the characters of the plays? Do the underlying mood, tone, and message of these plays correspond to the mood, tone, and message of primitive myths?

If one speculates that the primitive religious consciousness is the well-spring and foundation of all genuine religious feeling in succeeding ages, then to compare Yeats's plays with primitive religious standards might offer a valuable insight into Yeats's religiosity. If the plays are fundamentally in tune with the religious feelings of the primitives, then Yeats could be considered a fundamentally successful religious (not pietistic) writer. If, on the other hand, the plays are not found to be in tune

with our criteria, then Yeats, for all the spectacular ritualistic and mythological trappings of his plays, may be a representative more of the modern, alienated consciousness than of the religious consciousness.

To establish some kind of outside and objective point of comparison, this essay will use the writings of the noted anthropologist and historian of religion, Mircea Eliade. His book The Sacred and the Profane, published in 1957, is clear, precise, and scholarly. In it he tries "to present the specific dimensions of religious experience, to bring out the differences between it and profane experience of the world."[5] Using Eliade's book, it is possible to draw out some objective descriptions of the religious experiences of primitive men. We will be especially interested in the experiences of sacred space, sacred time, and primitive myth. With these descriptions in mind, we will then analyze some of Yeats's prose writings on the theater and two of his plays, "At the Hawk's Well" and "Purgatory." These two plays seem especially well suited for this type of investigation, although it seems that any of Yeats's plays could be analyzed in the same way and would yield similar results. The analyses will enquire if any primitive religious concepts are contained within the plays--and to which ends these concepts are employed.

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[5] Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), p. 17.

I. Eliade's The Sacred and the Profane

A) Sacred Space

Mircea Eliade describes the religious experiences of primitive homo religiosus in his book The Sacred and the Profane. He calls those moments when the sacred manifests itself to men hierophanies. Hierophanies are those occasions when men witness the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, "i.e., that something sacred shows itself to us."[1] But if something of a wholly different order breaks through into the lives of men, then the space and the time in which this occurs become qualitatively different from the ordinary space and time in which men dwell--they become sacred. As Eliade says:

> For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others. . . . There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous.[2]

Primitve men felt sacred space to be different; it was not a matter of intellectual concepts. In the sacred they felt an order and a reality which they did not feel in ordinary space. Moses, for instance, is ordered to take off his

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[1] Ibid., p. 11.

[2] Ibid., p. 20.

sandals before the burning bush and is later led to the top of a mountain to receive the ten commandments. Clearly, these spaces were "set apart" from the ordinary space of daily life and commerce.

Primitive men found ordinary space in chaos, and chaos, to them, was essentially the same as non-Being. Eliade uses the term amorphous, lacking any form, to describe profane space. The manifestation of the sacred introduces a radical new reality into the world, and this is why sacred space is different from profane space.

> For primitives as for the man of all pre-modern societies, the sacred is equivalent to a power, and, in the last analysis, to reality. The sacred is saturated with being. Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacity. The polarity sacred-profane is often expressed as an opposition between real and unreal or pseudoreal.[3] (Eliade's italics)

Since the sacred spots were those spots in which the sacred had broken into the chaos, primtive men wanted to be associated as closely as possible to those spots. By communing with the sacred, primitive men could imbibe power and Being from that which was "wholly other." So the attitude of primitive men toward the sacred was a very positive and a very dependent one. Primitive men looked to the sacred to enliven their existence, to bring reality into the otherwise chaotic world.

But even the use of the term "world" is inappropriate

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[3]Ibid., pp. 12 - 13.

to describe profane space. There was no "world" in the eyes of primitive men until it was founded, and the "world" was founded through the use of ritual and the following of the paradigmatic acts of the gods. Before this founding, all was chaos.

But where can one begin to found a world? If all non-sacred space is chaotic and amorphic, then it is impossible to choose a place for a beginning. The gods, however, solved this problem for primitive men. Their entry into the world, their hierophany, marked the "center of the world," and thus marked a place where a beginning could be made. The sacred spot was a fixed spot, a spot marked out from the chaos which gave an orientation for all primitive men's activities:

> If the world is to be lived in, it must be founded--and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space. The discovery or projection of a fixed point--the center--is equivalent to the creation of the world.[4] (Eliade's italics)

In other words, primitive men could not comprehend the construction of a world in the space of Newtonian physics. To them there were two kinds of space which were qualitatively different, and the discovery of sacred space marked the foundation of a new world.

By using the example of Newtonian physics, however, Eliade does not want his reader to confuse the "concept" of homogeneous space with the "experience" of homogeneous space.[5]

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[4]Ibid., p. 22.

[5]Eliade makes this point on page 22 of his book.

Modern men, though we live with a concept of homogeneous space, nevertheless live with traces of sacred space in our lives. Vestiges of the feeling of sacred space still linger in places like our birth place, the places where we met our spouses, the White House, national historical sites, and, for contemporary men of religion, the churches. The feeling aroused when we visit these spaces is slightly akin to the powerful feeling of orientation and reality felt by primitive men in their own sacred spots. It is hard to describe, but we feel <u>different</u> in these spaces. Our lives are given orientation; we remember our roots; we know who we are a little better. Of course, primitive men felt the deeper reality of their sacred spots much more strongly.

The experience of profane space, which was thoroughly frightening to the primitive consciousness, is perhaps related to the present-day experience of the nihilist or the absurdist. The experiences of Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's <u>Waiting for Godot</u> are perhaps the best illustrations. These characters can not seem to orient themselves in the chaos. Consider, for example, the following dialogue:

ESTRAGON: Charming spot. . . . Inspiring prospects. (He turns to Vladimir.) Let's go.
VLADIMIR: We can't.
ESTRAGON: Why not?
VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.
ESTRAGON: (despairingly). Ah! (Pause.) You're sure it was here?
VLADIMIR: What?
ESTRAGON: That we were to wait.
VLADIMIR: He said by the tree. . . . Do you see any others?

ESTRAGON: What is it?
VLADIMIR: I don't know. A willow.
ESTRAGON: Where are the leaves?
VLADIMIR: It must be dead.
ESTRAGON: No more weeping.
VLADIMIR: Or perhaps it's not the season.
ESTRAGON: Looks to me more like a bush.
VLADIMIR: A shrub.
ESTRAGON: A bush.
VLADIMIR: A --. What are you insinuating? That we've come to the wrong place?
. . . . . .
ESTRAGON: We came here yesterday.
VLADIMIR: Ah no, there you're mistaken.
ESTRAGON: What did we do yesterday?
VLADIMIR: What did we do yesterday?
ESTRAGON: Yes.
VLADIMIR: Why . . . (Angrily.) Nothing is certain when you're about.
ESTRAGON: In my opinion we were here.
VLADIMIR: (looking around). You recognize the place?
ESTRAGON: I didn't say that.
VLADIMIR: Well?
ESTRAGON: That makes no difference.
VLADIMIR: All the same . . . that tree . . . that bog.[6]

Neither character knows where he is today, and neither can remember where he was yesterday. They have a tree on the set, but the tree offers precious little orientation. It does not set this particular spot off as different from any other. In short, the tree in Waiting for Godot is not a sacred tree; it does not charge the area with reality. All directions in the play are equally confusing; the space lacks Being.

There was an opposition, in the primitive mind, between the sacred space and the profane space. The border was marked with a threshold which was used in rites of pas-

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[6]Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot: Tragicomedy in Two Acts (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 10.

sage.[7] Stepping over the threshold from the profane into the sacred was, quite literally, a step from death and chaos into life and order. And the reverse was true as well. To be cast backward over the threshold from the order into chaos was to be cast into death and destruction. It is symbolic, therefore, in "Purgatory" that we are told the house's threshold has been removed, "gone to patch a pig-sty."[8] This is an ominous sign indeed. Somehow we are made to feel that there can be no passage between the mundane and the spiritual realms in this play--but more of this later.

Perhaps the best example in English literature of this opposition between the life-giving, sacred space and the death-dealing chaos can be found in Beowulf. Those beings who lived in the organized, developed villages--the Danes and Geats, for example--were considered humans and worthy of consideration as such. But beyond the borders of civilized territory were the "prowlers of the borderlands," the mearc-stapas. Among those who inhabited the chaotic border regions were Grendel and his mother. These creatures were considered less than human, descendants of Cain, because they dwelt in the territory beyond the founded world. That the medi-

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[7] See Eliade, pp. 25, 29 - 32.

[8] W. B. Yeats, The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats, new ed., enl. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970), p. 430.

[9] For example, Grendel and his mother are spoken of in the following way: "micle mearcstapan moras healdan," in line 1348 of Beowulf.

eval author chose to link Grendel and his mother with Cain proves that these creatures and their haunts were considered unholy and profane.[10] The profane and its inhabitants were forces which opposed the sacred, and this opposition is shown in Grendel's bloody raids on the Danish kingdom of Hrothgar. As further proof, the killing of Grendel's mother was placed into a ritual, mythical form. Eliade notes:

> The monsters of the abyss recur in many traditions. Heroes, initiates descend into the depths to confront marine monsters; this is a typical initiatory ordeal.[11]

And this is exactly what happened when Beowulf plunged into the waters to kill Grendel's mother. When Beowulf finally killed the she-monster, a definite sign was given that the forces of the sacred had won: "A flash blazed out; light sprang up in that place, just as when the sun, the sky candle, shines in its radiance from the heaven."[12] One scholar, Allen Cabaniss, goes so far as to suggest that a parallel exists between this victory of Beowulf and Christ's "harrowing of hell."[13]

Hopefully, the example from Beowulf gives a flavor

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[10] Beowulf, ll. 104 - 114.

[11] Eliade, p. 135.

[12] Beowulf in Beowulf and Its Analogues, ed. and trans. G. N. Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1971), p. 43.

[13] Allen Cabaniss, "Beowulf and the Liturgy," in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), p. 223.

of the thinking of primitive men about sacred and profane existence. Primitive men sought to live as much as possible in the sacred. Despite the fact that the sacred was felt to be a mysterium tremendum, that a hierophany was an encounter with the "aweful" and the "wholly other," primitive men felt that they needed to be as close to this power as possible.[14] They therefore built their town around the sacred spot. The hierophany gave them a place to begin, an orientation. Unlike Vladimir and Estragon, primitive men did know where they were located; they stood at the "center of the earth," or very close to it.[15] For this reason, primitive men constructed a sacred pole to mark the "center" around which they would build their lives.

Primitive men constructed their world around the spot revealed as sacred. But they constructed their world in a sacred way, i.e., they constructed their world following the sacred paradigms. By imitating the actions of the gods, which occurred in primordial times, they created their world by means of the same actions that the gods used in illo tempore.[16] They had no understanding of creation ex nihilo. Modern men, on the other hand, "create" their world by

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[14]The deity is described by these particular words in Rudolf Otto's classic treatment of the sacred The Idea of the Holy, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 12 - 14, 25 - 30.

[15]See Eliade, pp. 36 - 47.

[16]Eliade uses this phrase to mean the primordial times of creation. See pp. 69 - 70.

using their imaginations to extend their horizons. They feel less need to imitate traditional ways of acting; they prefer to create their own.

In summary, for primitive men

> Every world is the work of the gods, for it was either created directly by the gods or was consecrated, hence cosmicized, by men ritually re-actualizing the paradigmatic act of Creation. This is as much as to say that religious man can live only in a sacred world, because it is only in such a world that he participates in being, that he has a real existence. This religious need expresses an unquenchable ontological thirst. Religious man thirsts for being. His terror of the chaos that surrounds his inhabited world corresponds to his terror of nothingness.[17]

It is for these signs of sacred space that we will be looking in Yeats's plays. Does Yeats allow his characters to live and move in sacred space, or do his characters roam the profane? Further, one can ask whether Yeats tries to create a sacred spot on the stage itself so that his audiences can experience the sacred--or a feeling akin to it. After all, Yeats did talk about his hopes that his plays would plunge the audience into the Anima Mundi.

B) Sacred Time

If space was not continuous to the primitive consciousness, then neither was time. Primitive men lived in two types of time.[18] Profane time was the time in which they lived their everyday lives. It was a continuous time

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[17] Ibid., p. 64.

[18] See Eliade, pp. 68ff.

and was nonrecoverable. It was a linear time, and it flowed during the course of their year much like our own historical time. Like modern men's historical time, it spent itself as it went on.

Unlike modern men, however, primitive men had another type of time which could be called sacred time. Sacred time was entered through the recounting of myth and the performance of ritual. Sacred time differed from profane time in that it was not continuous nor linear. Sacred time could not expend itself and was infinitely recoverable and repeatable. During their rituals, primitive men actually returned to the mythical times in which their gods or heroes lived. (Again, we are talking about an existential experience and not an abstract concept.) In the ritual, men no longer lived in their own historical time, but returned to the pristine ages during the world's creation, when the gods first battled the chaos. Sacred time

> . . . is an ontological, Parmenidean time; it always remains equal to itself, it neither changes nor is exhausted. With each periodical festival, the participants find the same sacred time--the same that had been manifested in the festival of the previous year or in the festival of a century earlier; it is the time that was created and sanctified by the gods at the period of their gesta, of which the festival is precisely a reactualization. In other words the participants in the festival meet in it the first appearance of sacred time, as it appeared ab origine, in illo tempore.[19] (Eliade's italics)

The return to the earlier times was felt so strongly that sometimes an identification was made between the participants

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[19] Ibid., p. 69.

and the gods themselves.[20]

Primitive men entered sacred time through myths because they had a responsibility for creating their world. They created their world by imitating the paradigmatic actions of the gods, which they found in their myths. In the act of creation, primitive men leapt out of their everyday, mundane time, and shared the original time with their gods. So during the festivals and rituals, primitive men lived in sacred time and on sacred space.

The best example of this mentality came in the annual celebration of the new year. The primitives felt, as we do today, the need for renewal and rebirth at the end of each year. But for primitive men "life cannot be repaired, it can only be recreated through symbolic repetition of the cosmogony, for, . . . the cosmogony is the paradigmatic model for all creation."[21] So, at the new year, the old year did not simply "pass away"; it was destroyed. The old year was destroyed by the ritual enactment of the myth of creation, which told how the gods slew the dragon, the symbol of chaos, and founded the earth. During the new year's festival, primitive men actually re-lived the times of creation! "To reintegrate the sacred time of origin is equivalent to becoming contemporary with the gods, hence to live in their presence--even if their presence is mysterious."[22]

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[20] Ibid., pp. 145 - 146.

[21] Ibid., p. 82.

[22] Ibid., p. 91.

And

> A festival always takes place in the original time. It is precisely the reintegration of this original and sacred time that differentiates man's behavior before or after it. For in many cases the same acts are performed during the festival as during nonfestival periods. But religious man believes that he then lives in another time, that he has succeeded in returning to the mythical illud tempus.[23]

In the new year's festival, then, the world was re-created. But if there was a new world, then time was reborn again as well. So when primitives emerged from the new year's festival, when they passed out of sacred time, they entered a brand new time. They did not enter a new year which was continuous with the old; the old had been destroyed. They, in a sense, entered a new Garden of Eden.

Sacred time, then, is not the same as cyclic time. Primitive men did not enter a new year which was a repetition of the past. They lived again the times of creation, and then entered upon a whole new year. Old profane time had been destroyed, and it was not to be repeated.

Modern men, generally speaking, have no real experience of sacred time. We tend to view life as totally continuous and non-repeatable. The closest we come to the feeling is when we have the feeling of "walking in someone else's footsteps." Yeats catches a bit of this feeling in his poem "The Statues": "When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,/ What stalked through the Post Office?"[24] Yeats

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[23] Ibid., p. 85.

[24] W. B. Yeats, The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, definitive ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), p. 323.

expresses the feeling that the spirit of Cuchulain, that mighty Irish warrior, had been resurrected and was living in Pearse and the other heroes of 1916. But this is surely a pale comparison to the feeling of actually living *in illo tempore*, which was felt by primitive men.

Roman Catholic theology provides another analogous expression of sacred time. Catholic theology has steadfastly maintained that the "Sacrifice of the Mass" is a re-actualization of both the "bloody" sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary and the "unbloody" sacrifice of the Last Supper. Here we see a trace of the concept of sacred time. Theoretically, the time during which a Mass occurs is actually the same sacred time during which Jesus died on the cross, and during which he celebrated the Last Supper. There is even an implicit identification of the priest with Christ. Just as primitive man could say to his wife during the marriage act, "I am Heaven; thou art Earth!"[25] so the priest can say during Mass, "This is My body; this is My blood." The knowledge that the priest is really not Christ does not prevent the identification from taking place. In sacred time, he becomes contemporary with Christ.

The difference, however, between the Catholic use of sacred time and the primitive use lies in the fact that Jesus Christ is, in fact, a historical character. He lived a life in profane time. The gods and heroes of mythical time did not live in historical time, but continually lived

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[25] *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, VI, 4, 20, quoted in Eliade, p. 145.

in illo tempore, the ever-repeatable sacred time. So the Catholic priest leads his people not into mythical time, per se, but back to a definite historical period--a period which has been consecrated by the physical hierophany of Jesus Christ.

C) Myth

The role of myth in the lives of primitive peoples, then, should be evident from what has been said. Myth revealed the ultimate reality since it revealed the sacred. As was said, primitive men had a thirst for Being, so even the various ways of acting in their normal everyday life could become consecrated by following the primordial ways of acting. A man could surely hunt and fish by himself and in his own way, but if he could hunt and fish as the ancestral gods did, then his ways of acting would become sacred--hence more real. He knew how the gods acted through myths, so the myths fixed the paradigmatic ways of acting. An example of this might be the following aboriginal myth reported by Charles P. Mountford:

> A South Australian myth relates how a man, Kondole, hid his fire stick, rather than bring it with him to provide light for an evening's ceremony. When Kondole became a whale, another man, Tudrun, set out to find the precious fire stick. He had not searched for long when he saw a grass tree glowing with a strange light. This was Kondole's fire, which, escaping from its secret hiding place, had set alight the dry flower stem of the grass tree.
>
> Ever since, when the aborigines need fire, they take a flower stem of the grass tree and rub it vigorously with a piece of harder wood.

> The friction causes Kondole's hidden fire to ignite the powdered wood-dust, and the aborigines have fire.[26]

This myth illustrates how everyday actions of primitive men followed the paradigmatic ways of acting found in myth. Fire could be obtained by ubbing the stem of a grass tree with a harder piece of wood precisely because it was there that Tudrun found Kondole's hidden fire. Even though Kondole wasn't a god, the present-day aborigine's actions take on a slightly more "real" tone since they are prescribed by myth.

But myth did more than simply fix the paradigmatic ways of acting, for

> To tell how things came into existence is to explain them and at the same time indirectly to answer another question: Why did they come into existence? The why is always implied in the how--for the simple reason that to tell how a thing was born is to reveal an irruption of the sacred into the world, and the sacred is the ultimate cause of all real existence.[27]

So myths not only set the patterns of behavior, they also gave that behavior meaning. So long as primitive men could remember the primeval acts of the gods, they could experience no alienation, no existential anxiety, no dread. Man was not "condemned to meaning" in an inherently meaningless world, as Sartre would have it, but

> What we find as soon as we place ourselves in the perspective of religious man of the archaic societies is that the world exists because it was

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[26]Charles P. Mountford and Ainslie Roberts, The Dreamtime Book: Australian Aboriginal Myths (Melbourne: Rigby Ltd., 1974), p. 58.

[27]Eliade, p. 97.

> created by the gods, and that the existence of the world itself "means" something, "wants to say" something, that the world is neither mute nor opaque, that it is not an inert thing without purpose or significance.[28]

Myth was both, then, the record of past deeds and the giver of significance. It was also the key to the passage between the profane and the sacred, for the ritual enactment of myth led the participants into sacred time and space.

Myth could not be recited at any given time or place. It had to be recited during special seasons and festivals, and in special ways.[29] By knowing the myths, primitive men and women learned who they were. The transmission of the myths presented them with a world, a history, and a meaning to life all at once. This is why the transmission of certain myths often accompanied rites of initiation, and rites of passage. A young man or woman finally understood "who he was" and what he was doing on earth when he learned the sacred secrets of the tribe.

The plays of W. B. Yeats suggest themselves as self-conscious attempts at creating new myth. With few exceptions, from "The Countess Cathleen" through "The Death of Cuchulain," the plays seem to present the audience with a world in mythical time. They <u>seem</u> to offer some orientation in the chaos--to mark out sacred spots. Yeats calls for them to be done in a ritualistic manner, but how deep does this concern for the sacred experience go?

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[28] Ibid., p. 165.

[29] Ibid., p. 97.

II. Yeats and the Primitive Religious Consciousness: "The Celtic Element in Literature"

In the introduction to Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland Yeats wrote that "Everyone is a visionary, if you scratch him deep enough. But the Celt is a visionary without scratching."[1] It was only natural, then, that when Yeats wanted to write about the supernatural in literature, he turned to the traditions of the Celts. In the essay "The Celtic Element in Literature," dated 1897, Yeats sets down what he sees as the characteristics of primitive religious consciousness, and he claims to find all of these characteristics in Celtic literature.

The main characteristic of primitive religious consciousness, according to Yeats, was a direct involvement with nature:

> Once every people in the world believed that trees were divine, and could take a human or grotesque shape and dance among the shadows; and that deer, and ravens and foxes, and wolves and bears, and clouds and pools, almost all things under the sun and moon, and the sun and moon, were not less divine and changeable. They saw in the rainbow the still bent bow of a god thrown down in his negligence; they heard in the thunder the sound of his beaten water jar, or the tumult of his chariot wheels; and when a sudden flight of wild ducks, or of crows, passed over their heads, they thought they were gazing at the dead hastening to their rest.[2]

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[1] Yeats, Fairy and Folk Tales, p. 4.

[2] Yeats, Essays, p. 215.

Yeats envisioned the primitive consciousness as being purely pantheistic. The trees, the sun, the moon, and the stones were all gods--all alive with a terrible life of their own. His theory, of course, here parts company with Eliade's. For Eliade, hierophany implied that the "wholly other" broke into man's existence <u>through</u> nature, but for Yeats it seems that nature itself <u>is</u> the "wholly other." Yeats thought that the ancients were "nearer to ancient chaos, every man's desire, and had immortal models before them."[3] Yeats's primitive men lived close to the sacred, but their lives were built around the sacred <u>passion</u>.

> They worshipped nature and the abundance of nature, and had always, as it seems, for a supreme ritual that tumultuous dance among the hills or in the depths of the woods, where unearthly ecstasy fell upon the dancers, until they seemed the gods or the godlike beasts, and felt their souls overtopping the moon.[4]

Here in the writing of Yeats is a description of the primitive experience of sacred time and place, the feeling of being one with the gods <u>in illo tempore</u>, and one with them in meaning. Further, it is through a ritual which led the participants into an experience of chaos,[5] a Dionysian dance, that the primitives entered this sacred state. They felt boundless and unconstrained, wild and powerful.

It was through a contact with this ancient feeling that folk literature gained its power: "All folk literature,

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[3]Ibid., p. 220.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Though one would not usually link ritual with chaos, it is a distinguishing mark of Yeats's religious theory that he indeed does so. This is suggested by his calling the "supreme ritual" a "tumultuous dance."

and all literature that keeps the folk tradition, delights in unbounded and immortal things."[6] More specifically, the Celtic element in literature is especially filled with this feeling. Yeats commented that Celtic

> "natural magic" is but the ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship of nature and that troubled ecstasy before her, that certainty of all beautiful places being haunted.[7]

This means that literature in the Celtic tradition has a natural feeling for sacred space and time. Celtic primitives easily sensed the shimmering "otherness" behind the natural phenomena. But Yeats goes further, for he claims that <u>all</u> great literature must share this Celtic sensitivity to the preternatural:

> I will put this differently and say that literature dwindles to a mere chronicle of circumstance, or passionless phantasies, and passionless meditations, unless it is constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times.[8]

Is it any wonder that Yeats himself sought to incorporate a feeling for the sacred into his plays?

But is there a difference between the feeling of the sacred as described by Yeats and the feeling of the sacred as offered by Eliade? Eliade claims that the primitive consciousness thirsted for Being, and found that Being in the sacred. Certainly there is a sense in which the wild, Dionysian dances of Yeats's primitives were a search for

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., p. 217.

[8] Ibid., p. 228.

Being and fullness. But it is noteworthy that Yeats's primitives find Being in the exact place in which Eliade's primitives find non-Being: "ancient chaos." Eliade claims that the primitive consciousness had a terror of chaos; Yeats calls chaos "every man's desire." Here is a fundamental parting, and one can expect that the religious experience which is constructed into Yeats's art would follow his own feeling in this matter.

That fullness and Being are found in chaos gives a feeling of "troubled ecstasy" to Yeats's view of religious experience. Certainly all experience of the "wholly other" must be "dreadful" and "awesome," but with Yeats "awe" turns to fear and "dread" turns to loathing. This will become apparent in Cuchulain's experience with the gods "At the Hawk's Well." The gods there are called "deceivers" and there is a feeling in the play of combat between the gods and men.

Essentially, then, the experience of the divine was an organizing and assuring experience for Eliade's primitives, but not for Yeats's primitives. Eliade says that the hierophany gave men a starting point, a "center of the world," but Yeats claims that the primitive sought chaos, "unbounded and immortal things" in the sacred.

This vital difference will ultimately lead Yeats to the shocking statement that "Life," for the primitive,

> was so weighed down by the emptiness of the great forests and by the mystery of all things, and by the greatness of its own desires, and, as I think, by the loneliness of much beauty; and it seemed so

> little and so fragile and so brief, that nothing could be more sweet in the memory than a tale that ended in death and parting, and than a wild and beautiful lamentation.[9]

For Eliade, the experience of the sacred led men to "found their world," to build, to grow. But, for Yeats, the experience of the sacred ultimately led to the opposite: thoughts of death. Eliade comments that "the modern Occidental experiences a certain uneasiness before many manifestations of the sacred."[10] Perhaps Yeats was observing the primitive religious consciousness too much through the spectacles of a modern Occidental. In any case, Yeats's understanding of the primitive religious experience was to have a strong influe ce on his drama.

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[9]Yeats, Essays, p. 224.

[10]Eliade, p. 11.

III. The Plays: Methods of Presentation and Supposed Effects

There is no doubt that Yeats wanted his plays to be presented in a ritualistic manner. He even wanted his poetry to be "chanted"--not the chant of the Roman or Greek liturgy, but something very close to it.

> Like every other poet, I spoke verses in a kind of chant when I was making them; and sometimes, when I was alone on a country road, I would speak them in a loud chanting voice, and feel that if I dared I would speak them in that way to other people.[1]

The chanting imitated ordinary speech rather than song in that it used a chromatic rather than a diatonic scale (including quarter tones), and could best be accompanied by a psaltery which contained "all the chromatic intervals within the range of the speaking voice."[2] The chant, performed for the great poet by Florence Farr, differed from ordinary speech, however, in that it had a set form, and "assume[d] that subtle monotony of voice which runs through the nerves like fire."[3] This chant was to be the background for the mystic experience which Yeats wanted to build into his plays.

Yeats was concerned with the way the verse was to be spoken because he felt that the art of great drama was being

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[1] Yeats, Essays, p. 17.

[2] Ibid., p. 19.

[3] Ibid., p. 21.

lost. The "theatre of commerce," he maintained, had shifted dramatic values away from the spoken word to the spectacle. He commented that "the theatre began in ritual, and it cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient sovereignty."[4] But this concern over the emphasis on words, music, and ritual seems to come not only from aesthetic concerns--it comes also from Yeats's "theology." He wanted his audiences to experience the wild, purifying plunge into chaos, and he needed verse, music, and ritual to help him do this.

This ought not surprise us if we recall Yeats's essay "The Celtic Element in Literature." If the primitive religious experience (as typified by that of the primitive Celt) was the root of all good literature, it is no wonder that Yeats had nothing but scorn for the "theatre of commerce." In the writing of a realistic or naturalistic play, the particular physical details of a given setting are important because they give the play its feeling of "reality." But the "reality" presented by the "theatre of commerce" was not that vibrant core of life that was felt in the "tumultuous dances" of the primitive Celt. Yeats believed that to plumb this reality he must move away from the surface, "profane" aspects of life. To this end, he played down spectacle and concentrated on the words in his plays. To this end he also molded his plays as rituals. "I hope to have attained," he

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[4]Ibid., p. 209.

said, "the distance from life which can make credible strange events, elaborate words."[5] Yeats also brought masks and dance into his plays.

> Our unimaginative arts are content to set a piece of the world as we know it in a place by itself, to put their photographs as it were in a plush or a plain frame, but the arts which interest me, while seeming to separate from the world and us a group of figures, images, symbols, enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation.[6]

In short, the use of symbol, chant, masks, and dance allowed Yeats to present that primitive Celtic religious experience on the stage. He hoped to have his audience submerged into a special time and onto a passionate plane of existence. He wanted his audiences to have the universal experience of the "wholly other."

In this "mystical" experience, the audience should react as a unit--emerged in the world soul, the Anima Mundi. Great tragedy has always been, wrote Yeats, "a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man."[7] And, in the tragedy

> If the real world is not altogether rejected, it is but touched here and there, and into the places we have left empty we summon rhythm, balance, pattern, images that remind us of vast passions, the vagueness of past times, all the chimeras that haunt the edge of a trance.[8]

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[5] Ibid., p. 273.

[6] Ibid., p. 278.

[7] Ibid., p. 298.

[8] Ibid., p. 300.

Clearly Yeats is appealing to the "sacred" experience. That which is called "real" by Yeats might be more properly called the profane. And neither Yeats nor primitive men considered the profane to be the core experience of life. Yeats's tragedy was to throw men into the core of life:

> Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. The persons upon the stage, let us say, greaten till they are humanity itself. We feel our minds expand convulsively or spread out slowly like some moon-brightened image-crowded sea.[9]

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[9] Ibid., p. 303.

IV. Analysis of "At the Hawk's Well"

"At the Hawk's Well" is a play about an episode in the life of the legendary Irish folk hero Cuchulain. In the play Cuchulain has heard stories about a mysterious well which provides the waters of immortality. Cuchulain willfully starts out to find the well, but when he does find it, the well does not yield its treasure easily, as Cuchulain thought it would. An Old Man who has waited for the mysterious water for fifty years tells Cuchulain of long years of frustration and terrible curses. He begs Cuchulain to leave, to return to a life of ease--"An old dog's head on his knees,/ Among his children and friends."[1] Cuchulain rejects the good life, however, and opts to face the heroic challenge. He bravely stares into the eyes of the Guardian of the Well, eyes caught in a sacred trance, eyes "not of this world,/ Nor moist, nor faltering" (142). He becomes ensnared by this gaze and is led off at the very moment in which the well bubbles forth with water. Thus Cuchulain brings a curse upon himself and loses the miraculous water too. He does not seem much changed at the end of the play, however, since he dashes off very quickly to do battle with the forces of Queen Aoife.

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[1]Yeats, Collected Plays, p. 143. Hereafter all quotations from Yeats's plays will be cited in the text by page number.

The play, of course, is partially derived from a pre-existent Celtic legend.[2] Yeats was given the character, but he himself invented the mythical situation: the journey of the hero to a well filled with the waters of immortality. "At the Hawk's Well" is woven from the "stuff" of myth.

As one reads the description of the set, one gets the impression that Yeats is less interested in telling his audience what the spot was actually like than in setting up symbols for a ritual. Skene offers this insight too.[3] The wind, for example, could represent vague and restless desires. The well, the source of life-giving waters, symbolizes the well-spring of existence. The hazel trees symbolize the tree of life in old Irish mythology. The image of a young man, "Pallor of an ivory face,/ Its lofty dissolute air," climbing the jagged rocks toward the well brings to mind primitive initiation cults and rituals. All these details make us feel that Yeats is taking the audience to a sacred spot, and what we are to feel will be universal and timeless.

Even the characterization in this play is "mythical." The play presents us with characters which are too one-dimensional to be real persons. There are no grey areas,

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[2]See Augusta Gregory, Cuchulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster, 5th ed., with a Preface by W. B. Yeats (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1973).

[3]Examples found in this paragraph are taken from Reg Skene, The Cuchulain Plays of W. B. Yeats: A Study (New York: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 125ff.

no ambiguities, in Cuchulain and the Old Man; they are character-types and not individuals. Even the designations that Yeats gives each character to identify their lines, Old Man and Young Man, suggest this. The two characters are the direct antitheses of each other. Cuchulain is the headstrong, courageous, and unthinking warrior, and his foil is a patient, meek, and wise old man. There are no grey areas here; each character acts as he must.

The Old Man "has been watching by his well/ These fifty years" (138). The wait has been difficult and has taken its toll, for the Old Man seems "as dried up as the leaves and sticks" (141). But he is a patient man much like old king Hrothgar in Beowulf, who waits for the salvation of Heorot without himself daring to do battle with Grendel. Nor does the Old Man dare look directly into the eyes of the Guardian of the Well.

The Old Man is cantankerous; he chides the Guardian of the Well for not speaking and says that she is "stupid as a fish." He greets Cuchulain with some hard and unfriendly questions which prompt Cuchulain to remark, "You should be native here, for that rough tongue/ Matches the barbarous spot" (139).

For all his roughness with words, the Old Man is basically a coward, Cuchulain's antithesis. He dares not take direct action to accomplish his goal, but he prefers to wait and hope that fortune will be kind to him. He dares not look into the eyes of the Guardian of the Well, since

"There falls a curse/ On all who have gazed in her unmoistened eyes," even though "Those that have long to live should fear her the most,/ The old are cursed already" (141). He is the classic type of the man who loses his moral courage and assurance in old age.

Cuchulain, on the other hand, is the direct man-of-the-world, one of those "who are crazy for the shedding of men's blood,/ and the love of women" (139). He is not patient, nor does he organize his desires and his methods. He relates:

> A rumour has led me,
> A story told over the wine towards dawn.
> I rose from table, found a boat, spread sail,
> And with a lucky wind under the sail
> Crossed waves that have seemed charmed, and found
> this shore. (139)

Cuchulain is extremely self-confident and assured. He expects success to come quickly to any endeavor to which he puts his hand. The Old Man scoffs:

> And do you think so great a gift is found
> By no more toil than spreading out a sail,
> And climbing up a steep hill? O folly of Youth. (140)

But this does not deter the young Cuchulain. He courageously grasps at the goal which he has chosen. Intent on doing whatever is necessary to drink from the well, Cuchulain even dares to look straight into the eyes of the Guardian of the Well.

> Why do you fix those eyes of a hawk upon me?
> I am not afraid of you, bird, woman, or witch.
> Do what you will, I shall not leave this place
> Till I have grown immortal like yourself. (142)

Even when caught in the trance of the possessed woman, Cu-

chulain loses none of his self-confident swagger:

> Run where you will,
> Grey bird, you shall be perched upon my wrist.
> Some were called queens and yet have perched
> there. (143)

Cuchulain has the heroic courage to take whatever direct actions are needed, and yet, in the end, he fares no better than the Old Man. The bird-woman distracts him at the very moment when the well fills with water, so the heroic deed is self-defeating.

Unlike a true individual, Cuchulain is not changed by his experience at the Hawk's Well. He has faced his heroic challenge, and yet he has been robbed of the prize. He should pause to consider this, yet he doesn't. He is as headstrong as ever, and as near-sighted. He, like Beowulf, is a hearty, brutal fighter whose first response comes from the sword. Cuchulain charges off to meet Aoife in battle at the end of the play. He has not gained the waters of immortality, but he continues to be a hero: "He comes! Cuchulain, son of Sualtim, comes!" (144).

If the characters in "At the Hawk's Well" seem mythical, the location of the action also seems so. From the very beginning of the play, the location is made to seem strange and inhospitable. The Musicians sing:

> I call to the eye of the mind
> A well long choked up and dry
> And boughs long stripped by the wind
> . . . . . .
> a place
> The salt sea wind has swept bare. (136)

As the play goes on, the spot is always referred to in terms

which are forbidding and foreign. There are jagged rocks and threatening thorn bushes all around. The wind is not an ordinary wind but a harsh, stinging, salt wind. The well is described as dry and choked with leaves; this is an ominous sign, since water is the source of life and fertility. Finally, it is the end of the day. By all the signs this is not an ordinary spot. It is a spot set apart, a sacred spot. On such a spot, where time and history stand still, a man could conceivably meet the universal forces which sweep through the world like the wind, "the salt wind, the sea wind." The well has all the earmarks of a primitive sacred pole. The space around the well is not homogeneous with the rest of profane space. It is somehow above it. The salt sea wind has swept it bare--it is somehow awesome in its bareness--somehow both purified and terrible.

The spot is indeed the site of a hierophany, a breaking of the sacred into the profane. The well is attended by a priestess, the Guardian of the Well, who is sporadically caught up in a trance by "The Woman of the Sidhe herself,/ The mountain witch, the unappeasable shadow" (141). And she, with all her terrible power, will manifest herself to the ordinary men who happen to be there.

The well <u>is</u> the orienting point for the two central characters. The Old Man has waited by the well for fifty years. He hopes to drink the water of the well, and thereby to gain immortality. This expectation echoes the expectations of Eliade's primitive men who gained access to Being and

"the real" through their contact with the sacred. Cuchulain also wishes to gain access to the water of the well; he hopes to gain it not, like the Old Man, through patient waiting, but through force of courage. He will attempt to force the well to offer its water to him.

But there is something fundamentally different here between the well of Yeats and the sacred spot of Eliade's primitive men. The Hawk's Well is characterized as a barren place. "The mountain side grows dark," sings the First Musician. "The withered leaves of the hazel/ Half choke the dry bed of the well" (137). And the Old Man asks Cuchulain: "Who comes so suddenly to this place/ Where nothing thrives?" (139). Cuchulain calls it a "barbarous spot." There is a portentous feeling of desperation about the spot in the Musicians' song:

> 'O wind, O salt wind, O sea wind!'
> Cries the heart, 'it is time to sleep;
> Why wander and nothing to find?
> Better grow old and sleep.' (138)

The play is a mythical account of a hierophany, but the deity which manifests itself is neither benevolent nor gracious. Primitive men, according to Eliade, sought out their sacred spots for contact with the deity precisely because the deity offered actuality and meaning to them. But the deity in "At the Hawk's Well" is not such a deity; her gift is not easily accessible. Moreover, she deliberately tries to fool those men foolish enough to try and drink from the well. She is called a "deceiver of men" and has purposely toyed with the Old Man for fifty years. But worse, she is out

to "allure and destroy" men, for "There falls a curse/ On all who have gazed in her unmoistened eyes." Contrary to the effect of Eliade's hierophany, the hierophany in this play delivers a curse instead of a blessing. The sacred life which runs through the veins of the Guardian of the Well brings death. The Old Man cries:

> Look at her shivering now, the terrible life
> Is slipping through her veins. She is possessed.
> Who knows whom she will murder or betray
> Before she awakes in ignorance of it all,
> And gathers up the leaves? (142)

Paradox is at the very foundation of religious experience, but Yeats takes paradox to its extreme limits. There is a promise of life at the Hawk's Well, but that life is never to be given to men. "The accursed shadows have deluded me," the Old Man cries. "The water flowed and emptied while I slept" (143). The experience of the sacred brings nothing but frustration and grief to the Old Man: "Accursed dancers, you have stolen my life" (143). Here is the deepest irony of all: his quest for the waters of life has actually stolen the Old Man's life. And Cuchulain fares no better for all his manly flourish. The Old Man tells him: "Never till you are lying in the earth/ Can you know rest" (143). Although he <u>will</u> gain a type of immortality through the fame of his heroic deeds, Cuchulain is left without peace. The goddess at the Hawk's Well is in no way gracious or benevolent. And if like St. Thomas Aquinas we equate goodness and Being, then this sacred spot lacks Being altogether. Its appearance deceives; its fruits are chaos and death.

So there is a fundamental disparity between the sacred experience at the Hawk's Well and that described by Eliade. Yeats's sacred experience does not offer the assurance and the order that Eliade causes us to expect from the sacred. On the contrary, in this play those qualities are to be found in the mundane life. The Musicians, commenting on the quests of Cuchulain and the Old Man, direct the audience away from the sacred. They invoke human faces, not the gods:

> Come to me, human faces,
> Familiar memories;

They invoke those finite, comfortable entities because they have witnessed the terrible outcome of the hierophany at the Hawk's Well.

> I have found hateful eyes
> Among the desolate places,
> Unfaltering, unmoistened eyes.

They have seen that the sacred is hateful and devious. It is barren and desolate, nor is there life in it. For this reason they proclaim:

> Folly alone I cherish,
> I choose it for my share;
> Being but a mouthful of air,
> I am content to perish;
> I am but a mouthful of sweet air.
>
> O lamentable shadows,
> Obscurity of strife!
> I choose a pleasant life
> Among indolent meadows;
> Wisdom must live a bitter life.

The Musicians' wish is "folly" to the hero because it offers no hope of immortality nor of heightened experience. But neither does it generate the bitterness which comes from an

encounter with deceiving and hateful gods, those "lamentable shadows."

As a final irony, Yeats has the well and the tree, themselves symbols of the sacred experience, recognize the plenitude of Being in the common, everyday, profane life:

> 'The man that I praise',
> Cries out the empty well,
> 'Lives all his days
> Where a hand on the bell
> Can call the milch cows'
> . . . . . .
> 'The man that I praise',
> Cries out the leafless tree,
> 'Has married and stays
> By an old hearth, and he
> On naught has set store
> But children and dogs on the floor.'
> (144 - 145)

The divorce between Being and the sacred is complete. The <u>vita religiosa</u> is the path only of ascetics and heroes. The sacred has been shown to be empty of life. All life, all order, seems now to be in the profane. The well asks: "Who but an idiot would praise/ Dry stones in a well?" (144). A better question might be: who but Yeats could write a testament to the profane and dress it in the clothing of myth and ritual?

V. Analysis of "Purgatory"

In "Purgatory" we are introduced to two characters: an Old Man and a Boy. The Old Man turns out to be the father of the Boy, and he has brought the Boy to an old, ruined house for a very special reason. He tells the Boy to study the old house since the house once belonged to the family of the Old Man's mother. During the first half of the play, the Old Man relates the story of the house and of his unfortunate family: how his mother was married below her social status to a drunkard, who eventually brought ruin to the estate.

The Old Man's father neither had a formal education nor valued one, so he denied the Old Man a formal education. The Old Man <u>did</u> learn to read, however, and through the help of the "gamekeeper's wife" and a "Catholic curate" managed to develop some aristocratic sensibilities. These sensibilities were to be the seeds of tragedy, however, since the Old Man's father squandered the whole fortune of his wife's family on cards, horses, drink, and women. Eventually the father had to start selling the grand old house and its properties. The Old Man was eventually turned out into the streets, but not before he struck back in revenge at his father. One day the father came home drunk, set the house on fire, and burned it down. While the house was burning, the Old Man

killed his father with a knife. He justifies his act by stating:

> He killed the house; to kill a house
> Where great men grew up, married, died,
> I here declare a capital offense. (432)

The house has multiple connotations. It stands for the actual building which the father burned in an act of carelessness, but it also stands for the great family line which the father "polluted." It is also, in a sense, a sacred spot, a spot made sacred by the heroic lives of the woman's ancestors. One feels that the father performed an act of desecration by even marrying into the family (at least the Old Man thinks so). Finally, the house may stand for the actual life of the Old Man. By destroying the house, the father also destroyed his son; he cut his son off from the living roots to his past.

As the Old Man relates this story to his own son, the house lights up with the spirit of the Old Man's mother. Her spirit has returned to the house because it is the anniversary of her wedding and the begetting of the Old Man. This happens much like those reports from

> Spiritism, whether of folk-lore or of the séance room, the visions of Swedenborg, and the speculation of the Platonists and Japanese plays, [which] will have it that we may see at certain roads and in certain houses old murders acted over again, and in certain fields dead huntsmen riding with horse and hound, or ancient armies fighting above bones or ashes.[1]

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[1] Yeats, Essays, p. 520.

The whole tragic night of the Old Man's conception is replayed, and will be continuously replayed until the effects of that night are fulfilled. The sin of the Old Man's mother, according to the Old Man, is that she in passion conceived and started a chain of events which led to the fall of her demesne and household, and eventually to her husband's murder. The seeds of her son's Oedipus story were sown that night.

The Old Man means to release his mother's spirit by bringing the Boy to the house. He kills the Boy with the same knife with which he killed his own father, and thus tries to discontinue the chain of tragic effects. But his plan fails, and his mother starts to relive the event all over again. "Twice a murderer," he cries in despair, "and all for nothing,/ And she must animate that dead night/ Not once but many times!" (436). At the end of the play, he is left with nothing but a feeble cry to God, a God who can alone end his mother's cruel purgatory: "Appease/ The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead" (436).

The play can be understood more easily if one takes Yeats's theosophical beliefs into account. In good Neoplatonic fashion, Yeats believed in a general world soul, the Anima Mundi, from which artists, writers, and mystics draw their images and ideas. He observed:

> If you suspend the critical faculty, I have discovered, either as the result of training, or, if you have the gift, by passing into a slight trance, images pass rapidly before you.[2]

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[2]Ibid., p. 508.

By becoming very still, the artist or mystic is transformed, as it were, into a "polished mirror" which reflects these images into the interior eye. Since these images seem common to all men, Yeats concluded that they are bits and pieces of "a great memory passing on from generation to generation."[3]

But the images which pass through the mind of the sensitive man always seem to be touched with a hint of personality; they seem to be more than merely well-used archetypes from a giant, universal catalog. How could this be? The images do not move in confused, random motion, but seem to be clustered into unities. Yeats could only conclude that the ideas, far from being independent monads, actually grow together in branch-like fashion from "seeds" which are planted in the Anima Mundi. He writes:

> I am persuaded that a logical process, or a series of related images, has body and period, and I think of Anima Mundi as a great pool or garden where it [either] moves through its allotted growth like a great water plant or fragrantly branches in the air.[4]

Thoughts, and souls as well, are not completely spiritual in nature, but are composed of "animal spirits." They are, thus, partially corporeal. An individual's thoughts are nourished by the thoughts and energies which surround them in the great common pool, and they continue to grow. They take on, seemingly, a life of their own. Once a person sets a particular thought or desire in motion, he cannot recall it.

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 519.

> We can only refuse to start the wandering sequence or, if start it does, hold it in the intellectual light where time gallops, and so keep it from slipping down into the sluggish vehicle. The toil of the living is to free themselves from an endless sequence of objects, and that of the dead to free themselves from an endless sequence of thoughts.[5]

One gets the impression that Yeats's Anima Mundi is comparable to a giant, Freudian Id into which our daylight thoughts, passions, and memories are planted, and in which they grow, quite uncontrolled, through a tangled morass of quasi-corporeal images. One is reminded of Marvell's "vegetable love" which grew "Vaster than Empires, and more slow."[6]

Death of the body, apparently, does not halt the growth of these great "thought-networks." They are like large trees whose branches grow in all directions until they encounter an obstruction, or until the vital flow of sap is blocked, or until they are suddenly stricken from the tree by natural calamity or force of man's blade. A person's spirit, which is composed of all his various branches of thought, cannot truly attain eternal rest until these vegetative "thought-networks" are stopped from growing. Yeats comments:

> When all sequence [of branching memories] comes to an end, time comes to an end, and the soul puts on the rhythmic or spiritual body or luminous body and contemplates all the events of its memory and every possible impulse in an eternal possession of itself in one single moment.[7]

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[5] Ibid., p. 520.

[6] Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress," Andrew Marvell: Complete Poetry, ed. George deF. Lord (New York: Random House, Inc., 1968), p. 23.

[7] Yeats, Essays, p. 524.

After death, then, each spirit must go through a period of purgation, during which it re-enacts constantly the various passionate experiences which planted the seeds of its own "thought-networks." This period of purgatory can be ended in two ways. Either the various branches grow out until they reach their natural ends--in this, the "thought-network" is more like a solved cross-word puzzle than a tree--or the natural intensity of the "thought-network" is worn away by the constant repetition of the act--the tree runs out of sap.

The individual's "thought-network," then, continues to grow and branch after bodily death because it has a life of its own. It is, as we have mentioned, partially corporeal, and, though it exists in conjunction with the body, it is not entirely dependent on it. By insisting that the soul is partially corporeal, Yeats contradicted the Medieval Schoolmen. The Scholastics thought that the rational powers of men were his distinguishing characteristic, were completely spiritual, and were a step higher in metaphysical status than the vegetable or animal spirits. Yeats blurs their distinction, and in doing so, bridges the mind-body dualism which became a major problem in the seventeenth century.

Moreover, by making the thoughts, desires, and memories of a man partially corporeal, Yeats could explain how one man's thoughts affected those of another. He could also explain how the thoughts, desires, and memories of the dead affect those of the living; for example:

> The dead living in their memories, are, I am persuaded, the source of all that we call instinct, and it is their love and their desire, all unknowing, that make us drive beyond our reason, or in defiance of our interest it may be.[8]

When one takes on the philosophy of a purgatory, one can not help, it seems, but assume the philosophy of the Communion of Saints as well. The fantastic, vegetative thoughts, memories, and desires of the living and the dead must intertwine and affect each other. The living, thus, may help or hinder the dead souls from bringing their "thought-networks" to a peaceful end. Or, at least, it seems that this should be possible in some way.

In "Purgatory" the Old Man attempts to help his mother's "thought-network" come to an end. Since his son is a visible effect of his mother's night of passion, the Old Man thinks that by killing the Boy he can end his mother's purgation--at least there will be no further chance for the family line to continue.

So the Old Man brings the Boy to the house on the anniversary of his mother's wedding. This is the night when she will initiate the downfall of her family's great estate. It is a night fraught with passion, a night of beginnings, a night which initiates many "thought-networks." The Old Man realizes that his mother must relive this moment over and over again until this great "thought-network" comes to an end. He strikes out at the Boy and kills him:

> I killed that lad because had he grown up

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[8] Ibid., p. 526.

> He would have struck a woman's fancy,
> Begot, and passed the pollution on. (435)

This is his own simplistic solution to such a complex problem.

But all is in vain, for in reliving the act of the wedding night, the Old Man's mother regenerates her passion, and creates new living sap to insure the continuance of her memory. Her branching "thought-network" will just not die! But there is more, as Peter Ure says,

> There is a great irony in [the Old Man's frustrated attempt to free his mother's spirit], too. For this act, which is designed to finish "all that consequence," and indeed does so, is also a fresh addition to the links of consequence. Instead of a lengthening chain it makes of them a circular band of horror, a wheel of fire: the son kills the father, the father kills the son.[9]

The Old Man has not ended the effects of his mother's passion, but has tied them into a Gordian Knot!

Can there be anything sacred in this nightmare which the Old Man constructs? The fact that the dead souls must relive their moments of passion, and that the Old Man and the Boy are somehow participants in these moments, suggests that perhaps we have a form of sacred time in "Purgatory." If, however, the sacred time in "Purgatory" is similar to Eliade's sacred time in these respects, it differs from Eliade's sacred time in others.

First of all, the moments which become "sacred" in "Purgatory" are not taken from a non-historical, mythical time. They are the very historical moments in the lives of the suffering souls which become constantly repeatable at

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[9]Peter Ure, Yeats the Playwright (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 111.

the moment of death. These moments, moreover, are not <u>infinitely</u> repeatable, like those sacred moments in myth, since:

> The souls in Purgatory that come back
> To habitations and familiar spots.
> . . . . . .
> Relive
> Their transgressions, and that not once
> But many times; they know at last
> The consequences of those transgressions
> Whether upon others or upon themselves. (431)

So, though these moments have stepped out of the flow of history, they are not infinitely repeatable. They stop at the moment when all the consequences are worked out, or when their vital energy is completely spent in the re-enactment.

Another obvious difference is that these moments are filled with remorse and impatience; they tend, as it were, to move toward non-being--Yeats's chaos. Their end is their own self-destruction, while the end of Eliade's sacred moments was vitality, life, Being. Eliade's sacred moments burst with an overflowing of grace bringing plenitude to all who are caught up in them.

And this brings us to a final difference between Eliade's sacred time and that found in "Purgatory." The sacred time of Eliade was open to the entrance of primitive men. During the rituals and festivals primitive men actually became contemporary with their mythical gods. By entering into the rituals, primitive men stepped out of profane time and into a much more real time, the time <u>ab origine</u>. The Old Man and the Boy, however, though they witness the "sacred moment" when the Old Man's mother "relive[s her] transgressions,"

cannot enter into that time. They stand outside of that time, still immersed in history, and watch. This fact is brought to our attention especially when we realize that the murder of the Boy does not really affect the fate of the Old Man's mother. The ritual sacrifice never leaves profane time; it is not fruitful. The time of the living and the time of those in purgatory, while they are intertwined, are mutually exclusive like two separate strands bound into one cord. This, perhaps, is the thought behind the symbolism of the missing threshold. The threshold for homo religiosus represented the "narrow path" by which one could pass from the profane into the sacred and back again.[10] But in "Purgatory," the threshold of the house is "gone to patch a pigsty." It is an announcement that the attempt of the Old Man to help his mother's spirit is inevitably doomed to failure.

But what of the house itself? From the beginning, from the Old Man's injunction to "Study that house," it is clear that the house plays a central, "orienting" role in the play. It, like a sacred pillar, marks the center of the world for the Old Man and the Boy. Until they come to the house, all space seems chaotic for the pair:

> Half-door, hall door,
> Hither and thither day and night
> Hill or hollow, shouldering this pack,
> Hearing you talk. (430)

This is the world of Vladimir and Estragon. There is no orientation; all space is homogeneous.

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[10] See Eliade, pp. 181ff.

The aimless wandering is brought to an end by the pair's arrival at the house. Here is a marker; here is a point of orientation. It is not a vibrant, living marker, at least not at first.

> The floor is gone, the windows gone,
> And where there should be roof there's sky,
> And here's a bit of an egg-shell thrown
> Out of a jackdaw's nest. (431)

Next to the house stands another portent, a broken tree. The Old Man recalls:

> I saw it a year ago stripped bare as now,
> . . . . . .
> I saw it fifty years ago
> Before the thunderbolt had riven it,
> Green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as
> butter,
> Fat, greasy life. (430)

Evidently the house, the tree, the whole demesne were alive and vibrant earlier. These were the properties of a wealthy family, a family which came to ruin. And these were the properties which were to be the inheritance of the Old Man. So this "sacred spot" <u>does</u> orient the life of the Old Man, but it is not a healthy orientation; it is an orientation that drips with death.

Eliade says:

> Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.[11]

The house in "Purgatory" has its hierophany as well. But the <u>sacred</u> does not break through--it is the spirit of the Old Man's dead mother which ultimately marks this spot out

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[11]Eliade, p. 26.

of the chaos, and gives it meaning. And both the Old Man and the Boy bear witness to this fact.

The night of the apparition is a "festival" night, the anniversary of the Old Man's mother's wedding and of his conception, so it is right that the two participants are there to witness the events. But the house, the marker in the chaos, is flawed, and so is the Old Man's memory. This is brought out from the very start:

> I try to remember what the butler
> Said to the gamekeeper
> In mid-October, but I cannot.
> If I cannot, none living can. (430)

It is hard to assess how important this fact would have been, but the fact that the Old Man mentions it when he is trying to recall the house's "Jokes and stories" seems to set a general tone, i.e. confusion reigns in the memory of the Old Man. His memory is not only weak, but it is also warped by bitterness over the loss of the estate. Because of these two influences the myth, if "myth" is the proper word to use for the Old Man's story, of "Purgatory" will not be handed down properly.

This is important when we recall Eliade's claim that memory was an important key to primitive men. It was important to remember the various myths and rituals, for it was through these that primitive men learned the paradigmatic acts of the gods. In fact, Eliade says,

> [Primitive men's] whole religious life is a commemoration, a remembering. The memory reactualized by the rites . . . plays a decisive role; what happened <u>in illo tempore</u> must never be forgotten.

The true sin is forgetting.[12]

The myths must be remembered correctly, and they must be remembered in detail.

"Purgatory" is unique in that it is a relating of a myth inside the relating of a myth. The reader can view the whole play as a myth, but inside the play the Boy learns a myth too, the story of the house.

In initiation ceremonies of primitive tribes, young boys and girls were initiated into the secret myths of the tribe. The receiving of the secret lessons, the gnosis, brought them into a new stage of life, adulthood. Eliade comments:

> The initiate is not only the one newborn or resuscitated; he is a man who knows, who has learned the mysteries, who has had revelations.[13]

So the Boy in "Purgatory," like Cuchulain in "At the Hawk's Well," is being initiated. He is learning the family secrets, and further, he is learning them at the "center of the world," the spot from whence his seed sprung.

But there is more than gnosis in the rite of initiation.

> Initiation, death, mystical ecstasy, absolute knowledge, "faith" in Judeao-Christianity--all these are equivalent to passage from one mode of being to another and bring about a veritable ontological mutation.[14]

This was often seen in context of the death-resurrection

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[12] Ibid., p. 101.

[13] Ibid., p. 188.

[14] Ibid., p. 181.

scene. The initiate was to "die" symbolically in the ritual, and then rise again as a new creature.

> Initiation includes a ritual death and resurrection. This is why, among numerous primitive peoples, the novice is symbolically "killed," laid in a trench, and covered with leaves. When he rises from the grave he is looked upon as a <u>new man</u>, for he has been brought to birth once more, this time <u>directly by the cosmic mother</u>.[15]

With this in mind, we can finally receive the full impact of the Old Man's actions. The Boy is brought to the house in a sort of initiation rite. He learns the "secrets" of his family, the forbidden knowledge which he had never suspected before. He can expect to be recognized now as an adult. But after the <u>gnosis</u> is received, the ceremony starts to go wrong. The Boy rejects part of the secret: "No, you are mad!/ You are getting madder every day" (433). Indeed, the Old Man himself is not sure of the entire meaning of the night:

> I lack schooling.
> Go fetch Tertullian; he and I
> Will ravel all that problem out
> Whilst those two lie upon the mattress
> Begetting me. (434)

Not only is the Old Man ignorant of the sacred meanings, but the Boy is not interested. He covets only money, not the secret knowledge. He tries to run away with the Old Man's purse, but is stopped:

> Come back! Come back!
> And so you thought to slip away,
> My bag of money between your fingers.
> (434)

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[15] Ibid., p. 144.

Disregard for the "sacred" facts and a faulty understanding of the "secrets" are bound to lead to a tragic end. For the Boy, there can be no symbolic re-birth to manhood. Tragically, there is a death, but the Boy's death is not symbolic. In the presence of his father's ghost, the Old Man ritually murders his son. The ritual initiation has gone all wrong. Even the "sacred knowledge" is turned into a nonsense song; "Hush-a-bye baby, thy father's a knight,/ Thy mother's a lady, lovely and bright" (435).

Again Yeats's play subtly uses the concepts of sacred time and space, but they are used to different ends than those Eliade describes. There is no feeling of reality and Being in the house of "Purgatory." All is twisted and terrible. There is no hope of new life from the "sacred" moments of the play; the "sacred" moments are only pathways to despair. The cry to God at the end of the play is like an afterthought--cut off from the center of the play.

In "Purgatory" the sacred time is repeatable, but it can not be lived into by the Old Man and the Boy. In this respect it is not much different from the impotent memories which the Old Man carries with him throughout his life. The sacred space of the house did orient the Old Man's world, but this order did not bring life and stability; it brought death, despair, and doom. It would be perhaps truthful to say that in "Purgatory" the sacred had gone sour.

Conclusion

By analyzing "At the Hawk's Well" and "Purgatory," this essay has attempted to show that Yeats did incorporate some trappings of the primitive religious experience into his plays. The well seems to be the center of a sacred spot in "At the Hawk's Well." In "Purgatory" the characters seem to come into contact with a time which is qualitatively different from the ordinary time of daily life. And both plays seem to have traces of the mythological about them.

All of these aspects (together with the use of the masks, dance, and chanting in the presentation of plays like "At the Hawk's Well") make the audience <u>feel</u> that it is witnessing some sort of religious event. Indeed, from the essay "The Tragic Theatre," we know that Yeats wanted his audiences to feel that way. He wanted the tragic emotions found therein to break down "the dykes that separate man from man"--and to catapult the audience into the <u>Anima Mundi</u>.

It is clear, then, that the plays were to offer a religious experience to the audience. But it is at this point that we run into a paradox if we recall, for instance, the final stanzas in "At the Hawk's Well." In those stanzas the Musicians seem to counsel the common man to avoid the religious experience. Though Yeats's audiences may not have been mere common folk, they were not all heroes either. So

we have the paradox of a poet who designs his plays to be religious experiences while he devises new myths which caution the common folk against becoming involved with the sacred.

Faced with this paradox, one might conclude that Yeats toyed with the "trappings" of the sacred experience while consistently maintaining solid, humanistic values at the core of his plays--values which are found not in the sacred but in "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."[1] To settle into such a conclusion, however, is to ignore the intense seriousness with which Yeats approached the supernatural. Such a conclusion would deny Yeats's integrity as an artist. Leonard Nathan, for example, reminds us that the very reason why Yeats was such an avid experimenter in drama was that

> Neither traditional drama nor the realism of the new Ibsenite theatre. . . allowed for what he thought the most significant experience possible to man, that of supernatural reality. To define the human condition without reference to the supernatural was to reduce man's stature in both life and art.[2]

To say that the supernatural experience is "significant," however, is not to say that it is comforting, ordering, or gracious. On the contrary, Nathan goes on to suggest that the core of Yeats's spiritual philosophy was a war "of spiritual with natural order."[3] Man, a finite being, strives

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[1]Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 336.

[2]Leonard E. Nathan, The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats: Figures in a Dance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 1.

[3]Ibid., p. 2.

to submerge himself in the great universal consciousness, but he is met by hostility.

> The most marked characteristic in Yeats's attitude toward the supernatural was his belief in its impersonal cruelty toward the fragmentary, limited beings who attempted to attain unity with it.[4]

There is indeed nothing comforting or gracious about Cuchulain's meeting with the hawk woman or the Old Man's meeting with his mother's spirit.

Does this realization bring us any closer to solving our paradox? Perhaps it does, for if Yeats felt that the sacred was a destructive influence on the people who tried to attain unity with it, then he clearly could not preach a gospel of surrender to the sacred in his plays. At the same time, however, Yeats firmly believed that the sacred was the true source of energy and passion (as we have seen in his essay "The Celtic Element in Literature"), and he also declared that all great literature received its vitality from contact with those quarters. Thus he felt that his plays, "At the Hawk's Well" and "Purgatory" for instance, should be rooted firmly in the sacred. The paradox seems to be that though unbounded chaotic energy and passion, when captured, make for great literature, they can also destroy warmth, ease, and a truly human life.

It is here, then, that Yeats parts company with Eliade (and with fundamental religious traditions, if we accept Eliade as the authority in this matter.) Eliade says

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[4]Ibid., p. 5.

that the sacred experience gave primitive men assurance, order, and guidance. Yeats says that the sacred experience can deceive and destroy men. Humanistic values, for Yeats, come from human i.e., the profane, experiences.

In the end, then, Yeats incorporated the lesson of Crazy Jane into his plays:

> 'Fair and foul are near of kin,
> And fair needs foul.'[5]

And, in his plays, the sacred and profane are indeed mixed--sacred experience with humanistic values. For this reason his audiences are not assured, but they are led, perhaps, into the "troubled ecstasy" of Yeats's primitive Celt.

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[5]Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 254.

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